

The Unique Experiences of an Ambulance Driver

BY ARTHUR STRINGER

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THE rain had come on a little after 3, as sudden and heavy as though it had been a midsummer thunder shower.

A fusillade of bullets could scarcely have emptied Broadway more quickly. Men and women ducked under doorways, dodged into side streets, elbowed into theater lobbies.

Above the sidewalk, twenty paces from the empty doorway where I loitered, an awning suddenly appeared, springing up like a mushroom from a wet meadow. In toward one end of this awning circled a chain of broughams and taxicabs. As a carrier belt vomits grain into a mill bin, so this unbroken chain ejected hurrying men and women across the wet curb into an overlighted foyer.

I stood there, watching the last of the scattering crowd, watching the street that still seemed an elongated bull ring, where a matador or two still dodged the taunting charges of vehicles. I watched the ironic heavens pour their unabating floods down on that congested and overripe core of a city that no water could wash clean.

Then the desolation of the empty streets began to depress me.

I saw the lights of the theater not more than twenty paces away. It was already a warren of crowded life. The thought of even what diluted companionship it might offer me carried an appeal.

A moment later I stood before its box office window.

"Standing room only," announced the autocrat of the wicket. And I meekly purchased my admission ticket, remembering that the head of that particular theater had in the past done me more than one slight service.

Yet the face of this haughtily obsequious head usher, as his hand met mine in that freemasonry which is perpetuated by certain silk-threaded scraps of oblong paper, was troubled.

"I haven't a thing left," he whispered. "Unless you'll take a seat in that second lower box."

Even through the balize doors behind me I could hear the beat and patter of the rain. It was a case of any port in a storm.

"That will do nicely," I told him.

Yet it was not ordained that I should occupy that box in lonely and unvaried splendor. One of its chairs, set close to the brass rail and plush-covered parapet that barred it off from the more protuberant stage box, was already occupied by a man in full evening dress.

Yet I looked at this neighbor of mine, as I seated myself, with more interest than I looked at the play actors across the footlights.

It startled me a little to find that the man, at the moment, was equally oblivious of anything taking place on the stage. His eyes, fixed on the woman who sat at the back of the stage box directly in front of him, as I followed the direction of his gaze I was further surprised to discover the object on which it was focused.

He was staring, not at the woman herself, but at a pigeon-blood ruby set in the clasp of some pendant or necklace encircling her throat.

There was, indeed, some excuse for his staring at it. In the first place, it was an extraordinarily large and vivid stone. It caught and held the eye. It stood there, just below the hair billowed into its crown of Venetian gold, as semaphoric as a yard lamp to a night traveler.

About the man himself there seemed little that was exceptional. Beyond a certain quick and shrewd alertness in his eye movements as he looked about at me from time to time with a muffled resentment which I found not at all to my liking, he seemed medium in everything, in coloring, in stature, in apparel.

It may have been mere accident, or it may have been that out of our united gaze arose some vague psychic force which disturbed this young woman. For as I sat there staring at the shimmering jewel, its wearer suddenly turned her head and glanced back at me. The next moment I was conscious of her nod and smile, unmistakably in my direction.

Then I saw who it was. I had been uncouthly staring at the shoulder blades of Alice Churchill—they were the Park Avenue Churchills—and further back in the box I caught a glimpse of her brother Benny.

Yet I gave little thought to either of them. I must confess. At the same time that I had seen that momentarily flashing smile I had also discovered that the jeweled clasp on the girl's neck was holding in place a single string of graduated pearls—of very lovely pearls. I was also not unconscious of the quick and covert glance of the man who sat so close to me.

Then I let my glance wander back to the ruby, apparently content to study its perfect cutting and unmatched coloring. And I knew that the man beside me was also sharing in that spectacle. I was, in fact, still staring at it, so unconscious of the movement of the play on the stage that the dark scene, when every light in the house went out for a second or two, came to me with a distinct sense of shock.

A murmur of approval went through the house as the returning lights revealed to them a completely metamorphosed stage setting. What this setting was I did not know, nor did I look up to see. For as my idly inquisitive glance once more focused itself on the columnar white neck that towered above the chair back, a second and greater shock came to me.

The pigeon-blood ruby was gone. There was no longer any necklace there. The column of snow was without its touch of vandy light.

My first definite thought was that I was the witness of a crime that was as audacious as it was bewildering. Yet, on second thought, it was simple enough. The problem of proximity had already been solved. With the utter darkness had come the opportunity, the opportunity that obviously had been watched for. With one movement of the hand the necklace had been quietly and cunningly removed.

My next quick thought was that the thief sat there in my immediate neighborhood. There could be no other. There was no room for doubt.

I sat there, compelling myself to a calmness which was not easy to achieve. I struggled to make my scrutiny of this strange companion of mine as quiet as possible.

Yet he seemed to feel that he was still under my eye. He did not turn and look at me directly, but it was plain that he was only too conscious of my presence. And even before I quite realized what he was about, he reached quietly over, and, taking up his hat and coat, rose to his feet and slipped out of the box.

The sheer precipitancy of his flight was proof enough of his offense. His obvious effort to escape made me more than ever determined to keep on his trail.

And keep on his trail I did, from the moment he sidled guiltily out of that lighted theater foyer into the still drizzling rain of Broadway.

He was a good 200 feet ahead of me when I saw him suddenly veer about and dodge into a doorway. I promptly threw decorum away and ran, rad like a rabbit, until I came to that doorway. I saw, as I passed through it, that it was nothing more than the Broadway entrance to the Hotel Knickerbocker. As I stepped into its pillared rotunda I caught sight of my quarry hurrying out through one of the doors that open on Forty-second street.

I gained the open just in time to see him dodging down into the kloek of a subway entrance. He was through the gate before I could catch up with him. I had no time to turn back and buy a ticket, for conductors were already slamming shut the doors of a south-bound "local."

"Buy me a ticket," I called to the astonished "chopper," as I tossed a dollar bill over the arm which he thrust out to stop me. I did not wait to argue it out, for the car door in front of me was already beginning to close. I had just time to catapult my body in between that sliding door and its steel frame. I knew, as I caught my breath again, that I was on the platform of the car behind the jewel thief.

And I stood there carefully scrutinizing the line of car doors as we pulled into the Grand Central station. I did the same as we passed Thirty-third street, and the same again at Twenty-eighth street. The man had given no sign that he actually knew I was on his track. But I was certain of the fact that he was doing his utmost to evade pursuit.

This came doubly home to me as the train stopped at Twenty-third street and I saw him step quickly out of the far end of the car, look about him and dart across the station platform and up the stairway two steps at a time.

I was after him, even more hurriedly. By the time I reached the street he was swinging up on the step of a cross-town surface car. To catch that car was out of the question, but I waited a moment and swung aboard the one that followed it, 20 yards in the rear. Peering ahead, I could plainly see him as he dropped from this car on the northeast corner of Sixth avenue. I could see him as he hurried up the steps of the elevated station, cross the platform, and without so much as buying a ticket hurry down the southeast flight of steps.

I had closed in on him by this time, so that we were within a biscuit toss of each other. Yet never once did he look about. He was now doubling on his tracks, walking rapidly eastward along Twenty-third street. I was close behind him as he crossed Broadway, turning south, and then suddenly taking about, he entered the Bartholdi Hotel. There he exactly repeated his maneuver of the Knickerbocker, circling around to the hotel's side entrance on Twenty-third street.

Even as he emerged into the open again he must have seen the night-hawk cab waiting there at the curb. What his directions to the driver were I had no means of knowing. But as that dripping and waterproofed individual brought his whiplash down on his steaming horse a door slammed shut in my face. Once more I so far forgot my dignity as to dodge and run like a rabbit, this time to the other side of the cab as it swung briskly northward. One twist and pull threw the cab door open and I tumbled in—tumbled in to see my white-faced and frightened jewel thief determinedly and friendly holding down the handle on the opposite door.

His face went ashen as I came sprawling and lunging against him. He would have leaped bodily from the carriage, which was now swinging up an all but deserted Fifth avenue, only I caught and held him there with a gripiness born of repeated exasperation.

He showed no intention of meekly submitting. Seeing that he was finally cornered, he turned on me and fought like a rat. His strength, for one of his weight, was surprising. Much more surprising, however, was his ferocity. And it was a strange struggle, there in the half light of that musty and many-colored nighthawk cab. And I knew, as we fought like two wharf rats under a pier end, that I was right. I knew that my cause was the cause of law and order. That knowledge gave me both a strength and a boldness which carried me through, even when I saw my with-

ing and desperate thief groping and grasping for his hip-pocket, even when I saw him draw from it a magazine revolver that looked quite ugly enough to stampede a regiment. And as that sodden-leathered nighthawk went placidly rolling up Fifth avenue we twisted and panted and grunted on its floor as though it were a mailcoach in the Sierras of sixty years ago, fighting for the possession of that ugly firearm.

How I got it away from him I never quite knew. But when I came to my senses I had him on the cab floor and my knee on his chest, with his body bent up like a letter U. I held him there while I went through his pockets, quietly, deliberately, one by one, with all the care of a customs inspector going through a suspected smuggler.

The one thing I wanted was the pearl necklace with the pigeon-blood ruby. And this necklace I found, carefully wrapped in a silk handkerchief tucked down in his right-hand waistcoat pocket—which, by the way, was provided with a buttoned flap to make it doubly secure.

I looked over the necklace to make sure there could be no mistake. Then I again wrapped it up in the silk handkerchief and thrust it well down in my own waistcoat pocket.

"Get up!" I told the man on the cab floor.

He lay back against the musty cushions breathing hard and staring at me out of eyes that were by no means kindly.

"Don't imagine you can get away with that," he declared. "I could afford to smile at his impudent fury."

"Just watch me!" I told him. Then I added, more soberly, with my hand on the doorknob, "and if you interfere with me after I leave this cab, if you so much as try to come within ten yards of me tonight, I'll give you what's coming to you."

I opened the door as I spoke, and dropped easily from the still moving cab to the pavement. I stood there for a moment, watching his placid driver as he went on up the avenue, with one door still swung open, and swaying back and forth like a hand slowly waving me good-bye.

Then I looked at my watch, crossed to the University Club, jumped into a waiting taxi and dodged back to the theater, somewhat sore in body, but rather well satisfied in mind.

I felt inordinately proud of myself as I watched the final curtain come down. This pride became a feeling of elation as I directed my glance toward Alice Churchill, who had risen in the box in front of me, and was again showering on me the warmth of her friendly smile. I knew I was still destined to be the god from the machine. It was plain that she was still unconscious of her loss.

I stopped her and her brother on their way out, surprising them a little, I suppose, by the unlooked-for cordiality of my greeting.

"Can't you two children take a bite with me at Sherry's?" I amiably suggested.

"Benny oughtn't to be out late," she demurred.

"But I've something rather important to talk over," I pleaded.

"And Benny would like to get a glimpse of Sherry's again," interposed the thin-cheeked youth. And without more ado I bundled them into a taxi and carried them off with me, wondering just what would be the best way of bringing up the subject in hand.

V--ONE NIGHT OF RAIN



"I picked them up from the corner of that box, where they slipped off the lady's neck."

I found it much harder, in fact, than I had expected.

I sat looking at the girl with her towering crown of reddish gold hair. She, in turn, was gazing at her own foolishly distorted reflection in the polished bowl of the chafing dish from which I had just poured her with capon a la reine. She sat there gazing at her reflected face, gazing at it with a sort of studious yet impersonal interest. Then she saw suddenly lean forward in her chair, still looking at the grotesque image of herself in the polished silver. I could not help noticing her quickly altering expression, her inarticulate gasp of her parted lips, the hand that went suddenly up to her throat. I saw the fingers feel around the base of the completely slender neck, and the momentary look of stupor that once more swept over her face.

She ate a mouthful of capon, studiously without speaking. Then she looked up at us again. It was then that her brother, Benny, for the first time noticed her change of color.

"What's wrong?" he demanded.

The girl, when she answered him, spoke very quietly. But I could see what a struggle it was costing her.

"She looked at them without moving, her eyes wide with wonder. I could see the color come back to her face."

"How," she asked a little weakly, as she reached over and took them up in her fingers, "how did you get them?"

"You lost them in the theater box during the first act," I told her. Her brother Benny wiped his forehead.

"And it's up to a woman to drop \$40,000 and never know about it," he cried.

I watched her as she turned them over in her hands. Then she suddenly looked up at me, then down at the jewels, then up at me again.

"This is not my necklace," were the astonishing words that I heard fall from her lips.

"Oh, yes, they are," I quietly assured her.

"But I am left-handed," she explained, as she still looked down at them, "and I had my clasp, here on the ruby at the back, made that way. This clasp is right-handed. Don't you see, it's on the wrong side?"

"But you've only got the thing upside down," cried her brother. And I must confess that a disagreeable feeling began to manifest itself in the pit of my stomach as he moved closer beside her and tried to reverse the necklace so that the clasp would stand a left-handed one.

He twisted and turned it fruitlessly for several moments.

"Isn't that the limit?" he finally murmured, sinking back in his chair and regarding me with puzzled eyes.

But his bewilderment was nothing as compared to mine. I reached over for the string of pearls with the ruby clasp, and I took them and turned them over and over in my hands, weakly, mutely, as though they themselves might in some way solve an enigma which seemed inscrutable. I was still looking down at that lustrous row of pearls, so appealing to the eye in their absolute and perfect graduation, when I heard the younger man at my side call my name aloud.

"Kerfoot!" he said, not exactly in alarm and not precisely in anxiety, yet

with a newer note that made me look up sharply.

As I did so I was conscious of the figure so close behind me, so near my chair that even while I had already felt his presence there, I had for the moment taken him for my scrupulously attentive waiter. But as I turned about, and looked up at this figure I saw that I was mistaken. My glance fell on a wide-shouldered and rather portly man with quiet and very deep-set gray eyes. What disturbed me even more than his presence there at my shoulder was the sense of power, of unparaded superiority, on that impassive yet undeniably intelligent face.

"I want to see you," he said, with an unemotional matter-of-factness that in another would have verged on insolence.

"About what?" I demanded, trying to match his impassivity with my own.

He nodded toward the necklace in my hand.

"About that," he replied.

"What about that?" I languidly inquired.

The portly man at my shoulder did not answer me. Instead, he turned and nodded toward a second man, a man standing half a dozen paces behind him, in a damp overcoat and a sadly crumpled shirt front.

I felt my heart beat faster, of a sudden, for it took no second glance to tell me that this second figure was the jewel thief whom I had trailed and cornered in the musty-smelling cab.

I felt the larger man's sudden grin on my shoulder—and his hand seemed to have the strength of a vice—as the smaller man, still pale and disheveled, stepped up to the table. His face was not a pleasant one.

Benny Churchill, whose solicitous eyes bent for a moment on his sister's startled face, suddenly rose to his feet.

"Sit down," I told him. "For heaven's sake sit down, all of you! There's nothing to be gained by heroics. And if we've anything to say, we may as well say it decently."

The two men exchanged glances as I ordered the two chairs for them.

"Be so good," I continued, motioning them toward these chairs. "And since we have a problem to discuss, there's no reason we can't discuss it in a semi-civilized manner."

"It's not a problem," said the man at my shoulder, with something disagreeably like a sneer.

The man behind me was the first to drop into the empty seat on my left. The other man crossed to the farther side of the table, still watching me closely. Then he felt for the chair and slowly sank into it; but not once did he take his eyes from my face.

"That man's armed, remember," the jewel thief suddenly cried to the stranger on my left. He spoke both warningly and indignantly. His flash of anger, in fact, seemed an uncontrollable one.

"Where's your gun?" said the quiet-eyed man at my side. His own hand was in his pocket, I noticed, and there was a certain malignant line of purpose about his mouth which I did not at all like.

Yet I was able to laugh a little as I put the magazine revolver down on the table; it had memories which were amusing.

"Where'd you get that gun?" he inquired.

I nodded my head toward the white-faced man opposite me.

"I took it away from your friend there," was my answer.

"And what else did you take?" There was something impressive about the man's sheer impersonality.

"Had a man at my side. His own hand was in his pocket, I noticed, and there was a certain malignant line of purpose about his mouth which I did not at all like."

"Why?" demanded my interlocutor.

"Because he stole it. He was my prompter."

"Who from?"

"From the lady you have the honor of facing," I answered.

"Where?" was his next question.

I told him where. He was again silent for a second or two.

"Do you know who this man is?" he said, with a curt head nod toward his white-faced colleague.

"Yes," I answered.

"What is he?"

"He's a jewel thief."

The two men stared at each other. Then the man at my side rubbed his chin between a meditative thumb and forefinger. He was plainly puzzled. He looked at Alice Churchill and at her brother, and then back at me again.

Then, having once more absently caressed his chin he swung about and faced the wondering and silent girl who sat opposite him.

"Excuse me, Miss, but would you mind answering a question or two?"

It was her brother who spoke before she had time to answer.

"Wait," he interposed. "Just who are you, anyway?"

The man, for answer, lifted the lapel of his coat and exhibited a silver badge. "Well, what does that mean?" demanded the quite unimpressed youth.

"That I'm an officer," said the man, with a slight smile.

"What kind—a detective?"

"Yes."

"For what? For this place?"

"No, for the Maiden Lane Protective Association."

"Well, what's that got to do with us?" The large-bodied man looked at him a little impatiently.

"You'll understand that when the time comes," was his retort.

"Now, young lady," he began again, swinging back to the puzzled girl. "Do you say you lost a necklace in that theater box?"

The girl nodded.

"Yes, I must have," she answered, looking a little frightened.

"And you say it was stolen from you?"

"No, I didn't say that. I had my necklace on when I was in the box—both Benny and I know that."

"And it disappeared?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"I noticed it was gone when I sat down at the table here."

The dominating gentleman turned round to me.

"You saw the necklace from the second box?" he asked.

"I did," was my answer.

"You saw it disappear?" he demanded.

The jewel thief with the crumpled shirt front tried to break in at this juncture, but the bigger man silenced him with an impatient side swing of the hand.

"When was that?" he continued.

"What difference does it make?" I calmly inquired, resenting the prepotence of his interrogations.

He stopped short and looked up at me. Then the first ghost of a smile, a patient and almost sorrowful smile, came to his lips.

"Well, we'll go at it another way. You witnessed this man across the table take the necklace from the young lady?"

"It practically amounts to that."

"That is, you actually detected him commit this crime?"

"I don't think I said that."

"But you assumed he committed this crime?"

"Just when was it committed?"

"During what they call a dark change in the first act."

"You mean the necklace was on before that change, and gone when the lights were turned on again?"

"Precisely."

"And the position and actions of this man were suspicious to you?"

"Extremely so."

"In what way?"

"In different ways."

"He had crowded suspiciously close to the wearer of the necklace?"

"He had."

"And his eyes were glued on it during the early part of that act?"

"But, of course, I have rooted out the early part of that act."

"And you watched him?"

"With almost as much interest as he watched the necklace."

"And after the dark change, as you call it, the lady's neck was bare?"

"It was."

"You were sure of this?"

"Positively."

"And what did this man across the table do?"

"Having got what he was after, he hurried out of the theater and made his escape—or tried to make his escape."

"He embarrassed him, I suppose, to have you studying him so closely?"

"He certainly looked embarrassed."

"Of course," admitted my interrogator, "he certainly looked embarrassed and strung up, after which he sat with contemplative and pursed-up lips."

"I guess I've got this whole snarl now," he complacently admitted. "All but one kink."

"What one kink?" demanded Benny Churchill.

The man at my side did not answer him. Instead, he rose to his feet.

"I must prefer staying here," he retorted. "And for the second time he smiled his saddened smile."

"Oh, it's nothing objectionable," he explained. "Nobody's going to hurt you. And we'll be back here in ten minutes."

"But, oddly enough, I have rooted out objections to deserting my guests."

"Your guests won't be sorry, I imagine," he replied, as he looked at his sister's turn of a watch. "And we're losing good time."

"Please go," said Alice Churchill, emboldened, apparently by some instinctive conclusion which she could not, or did not care to, explain.

I also noticed, as I rose to my feet, that I still held the necklace in my hand. I was a little puzzled as to just what to do with it.

"That," said the sagacious stranger, "you'd better leave here. Let the young lady keep it until we get back. And you, Fessant," he went on, turning to the beilied-up jewel thief, "you stay right here and make yourself pleasant. And without begin' rude, you might see that